

# Lost: Samuel's POV

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# Lost: Samuel's POV

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# Chapter 1

I can't believe it. Ash is dead?

Delia asks Officer Jenny if there's been some mistake, but she assures her that it's not. Suddenly, Delia starts to collapse.

"Delia!"

I race to her side and grab her before she falls. As I help her to the couch, I notice that she's deathly pale. But at least she's still in enough control to thank Officer Jenny for calling. As the telephone screen goes black, she begins to cry.

"Ash... oh, Ash. My baby... my baby's dead," she wails as she buries her face in her hands. I sit down next to her and take her in my arms. I'm starting to tear up too. I'm crying not only for the boy lying at the bottom of the ocean, but also for his mother, who's now childless. And I'm crying for another reason too. The memory of an awful day nearly eight years ago has suddenly resurfaced.

Delia buries her face in my neck and cries with huge, gasping sobs.

"Oh, Delia," I whisper as I start stroking her hair in an attempt to console her. "I'm so sorry."

She cries harder and harder until she's nearly hysterical. She can't even speak, she's crying so hard. Realizing that she's starting to hyperventilate, I try to get her to calm down.

"Delia, shh. Try to breathe normally."

She tries to answer me, but can't. There's a panicked look in her eyes when she realizes that she can't catch her breath.

"Delia, calm down. Don't panic," I try to reassure her, although I'm starting to panic myself at the sight of her gasping desperately for

breath. "Listen to me. Try to calm down."

Choking, she pushes me away and gasps for breath, but I realize that she's too hysterical from grief to stop crying. I've got to do something before -

Suddenly, her eyes roll back in her head and her body grows limp.

"Delia!"

I manage to grab her before she hits the floor. Shaking from fear, a thousand horrible scenarios race through my mind - heart attack, stroke, aneurysm, asthma attack -- as I lay her down on the couch and press my ear to her chest.

Thank God, she's still alive. Her heart's racing, but as I listen for a moment, the frantic pounding slows down to a more normal rate. And the body's autonomic response has taken over, and she's breathing once more.

But still, I'm scared. I've seen people cry hysterically before, but I've never seen anyone collapse and lose consciousness just from crying. She looks so frail, so pale lying there that I wonder if the shock of Ash's death has done some sort of physical damage to Delia's system.

I jump up and quickly dial the number of Pallet Town's only physician. The nurse who answers explains that the doctor is out on a call and will stop by as soon as he's through with his other patient.

"Please tell him to hurry," I tell her urgently while I try to remember how to perform CPR on a human. I hope it doesn't come to that, but I'm not certain that Delia's condition is entirely stable.

"I will," replies the nurse. "In the meantime, keep Mrs. Ketchum warm and comfortable. Check her frequently to make sure she's still breathing."

"I will." I hang up the phone and hurry back to Delia's side to check her once more. She's still breathing. Remembering the nurse's advice, I cover her with the quilt that's lying on the back of the couch. As I tuck the blanket around her chin, I gently lay my palm against her cheek. She's so cold.

"What the hell is taking the doctor so long?" I mutter while I search around for another blanket.

A knock at the front door answers my question, and I nearly stumble over a footstool in my haste to answer it.

"Professor Oak? What's going on?" asks a bearded, brown-haired man standing on the doorstep as I yank open the door. "My nurse said that Mrs. Ketchum collapsed."

"Thank God! It's about time you got here, Doctor Byington." I grab his arm and drag him to Delia's side.

"What happened?" the doctor asks as he reaches inside his medical bag.

"Officer Jenny called earlier with some distressing news. Ash and his friends drowned aboard the shipwreck of the *St. Anne* off the coast of Vermilion City," I explain as I hover over the doctor's shoulder.

The doctor looks up from checking Delia's pulse in surprise. "Ash is dead? I... I can't believe it."

"Neither can I. I wish it weren't true. Delia started crying so hard that she couldn't catch her breath," I explain as the doctor reaches inside his bag for his stethoscope. "Then she collapsed."

I watch anxiously as he examines her.

"Well, her vital signs are normal," Doctor Byington replies as he removes the stethoscope from his ears. "I think she's just fainted, that's all."

I exhale in relief. I had been holding my breath throughout the exam.

"But when she wakes up, she needs to rest quietly for a while, although I know that's going to be difficult with everything that's happened," the doctor says, replacing the stethoscope in his medical bag.

"Doctor Byington, can you help me carry her upstairs to her room? I think she'll be more comfortable if she wakes up in her own bed."

The doctor gives me a skeptical look. "I don't think it would be a good idea to move her until she wakes up."

"But I think it would be less of a shock to her system if she wakes up in her own bed," I explain. "And besides, with my bad back, I can't carry her upstairs myself."

The doctor reluctantly agrees, and we carefully carry her upstairs to her room. Once we get her settled in bed, he checks her once more.

"Everything seems normal, despite the fact that she's had a terrible shock," he says as he puts his medical equipment back into his bag.

"Is she going to be all right?" I ask anxiously.

"Physically, she'll be all right, but emotionally is another story. In her condition, she shouldn't be left alone right now."

"Don't worry. I'm not going to leave her," I reply firmly.

The doctor reaches into his bag and hands me a pharmaceutical sample. I squint to read the label on the tiny pill bottle and realize that I'm in bad need of bifocals.

Doctor Byington notices my difficulty. "Give her one of these every six hours if she has difficulty sleeping tonight. I'll call later to see how she's doing."

"Thank you for coming over, Doctor."

"No problem, Professor Oak. Please give Mrs. Ketchum my condolences when she wakes up. Ash was one of my patients too." He shakes his head in disbelief as I accompany him downstairs. "I still can't believe it. Ash Ketchum dead."

"Neither can I," I reply sadly as I open the front door. "Neither can I."

"And Professor, be sure to stop by my office sometime in the future so we can get you fitted for a pair of bifocals," Doctor Byington says with a slight smile before he turns and heads down the sidewalk.

"Screw the damn glasses," I mumble under my breath as I shut the door. They're not what's important now. Delia is.

To be continued...

## Chapter 2

I hurry back upstairs to her room -- I don't want her to be alone when she wakes up. I silently open the door, not wanting to distress her any more than she's already suffered today.

I look down at her pale, tear-stained face. She looks so vulnerable lying there that I can't help but reach out and gently touch her hair.

*Please give me the strength to help her get through this, I pray.*

I pull the blanket atop her and tuck her in the same way I used to tuck in my own child at bedtime. And then sadness overwhelms me as I pull up the chair next to the bed and begin my vigil. A few seconds later, she begins to stir. Her eyes slowly open, and I lean over and take her limp hand in mine.

"Delia," I whisper softly, not wanting to startle her. "How do you feel?"

"I... what's going on?" she mumbles weakly.

*She doesn't remember what happened, I realize.* Then with a heavy heart, I realize that I'm going to have to be the one to tell her why she collapsed.

"Delia, do you remember the phone call from Officer Jenny?"

Delia looks puzzled for a second, then nods as her eyes fill with tears at the remembrance of what happened just before she lost consciousness. "Ash... he's... the ship..."

"Yes," I reply as I clutch her hand, hoping that perhaps she'll be able to draw some strength from me.

"No... oh no..."



She rolls over, buries her face in her pillow, and begins to cry once more. I reach over and start stroking her back in an effort to console her. I murmur words of consolation - empty though they may sound - as I try to provide some comfort to her, though I fear that I'm not doing much good. Eventually, the heaving of her shoulders ceases, as do her sobs.

"Delia?"

She doesn't answer. At first, I'm afraid that she's passed out again, but I look closer and realize that she's asleep. I'm worried that she'll smother with her head buried in her pillow, so I reach over and carefully turn her head to one side so she can breathe. Figuring that sleep is the best thing for her now after the shock she's had, I quietly tiptoe out of her room and head back downstairs.

As soon as I reach the bottom of the steps, there's a knock at the front door. It's Maureen, the nurse from Doctor Byington's office.

"How's she doing?" the young nurse asks worriedly as I open the door.

"She's asleep right now," I respond.

"I was on my way home, and I wanted to see if Delia was all right. We're all so worried about her," Maureen explains. "I'm going home right now and make her a casserole. Doctor Byington's wife said she was going to make some banana bread too. I'll bring them both over later."

"That's very kind of you, Maureen."

"It's the least we can do for her. Delia's always been so kind to us. Will you tell her that I stopped by when she wakes up?"

"I'll do that."

"I'll be back over in a couple of hours," Maureen calls back as she heads down the sidewalk.

Throughout the afternoon, the doorbell rings over a dozen times with friends and neighbors bringing condolences, cards, flowers, and food.

*Doctor Byington and Maureen must've told everyone in Pallet Town about Ash,* I think as I close the door and put yet another casserole on the kitchen table.

I decide to check on Delia before the next wave of visitors arrives. I carefully open the door to her bedroom and peek in. She's still asleep - hasn't even moved. I listen to her slow, soft breathing for a moment, then return downstairs just in time to hear more knocking at the door.

For the rest of the afternoon and the early part of the evening, I'm so busy answering the door that I barely have time to check on Delia. In between visitors, I grab a few bites from the various casseroles and desserts that are rapidly filling the kitchen table. With everything that's gone on today, I've forgotten that I haven't had anything to eat since breakfast. The stream of visitors eventually slows to a trickle and finally ceases around eight o'clock. I stuff a piece of Mrs. Byington's banana bread into my mouth, then head back upstairs to Delia.

As I enter the room, she stirs and makes a groaning noise. Since the sun has set a half-hour ago, the room is now dark. Delia slowly turns her head in the direction of the faint click of the lamp on the table next to her bed as I turn it on. As she looks up at me with her bloodshot, dark-circled eyes, my heart aches.

"Delia," I whisper. "I'm here."

"Samuel," she whispers back hoarsely, reaching for my hand. Even though she's lying underneath a pile of blankets, I'm shocked at how cold she is -- as cold as death itself.

The thought sends a chill up my spine. I ask her if she wants to eat anything, but she refuses.

And then I wonder if that's what she's thinking. Does she want to die? Does she want to join her son?

And when her eyes light up at the sight of the bottle of sedatives sitting on the table next to her bed, my fears are confirmed.

Well, sorry, Delia. I'm not going to let you die.

When I take the bottle away from her, she looks as if she wants to kill me.

Oh yes, Delia. I know what you're going through. I know how it feels to lose a child. I understand all too well the same pain that you're feeling right now.

I glance at my left wrist.

Oh yes, Delia. I know all too well.

Even though it's a part of my past that I'd rather not discuss, I decide to tell Delia about my own suicide attempt when my son died. Even though it's painful for me to talk about it, if my experience can keep Delia from taking her own life, it's worth reliving all the pain and shame that I felt when I slit my wrist.

I still have nightmares about that day. Blood pouring everywhere - over my research papers, my clothes, the floor, even on the poor, frightened Rattata that wandered in when it heard my cries.

I still thank God that Spencer found me when he did. But even today, I can clearly see the look of horror on his face when he came into the lab and saw me covered in my own blood.

And even now, I don't enjoy having to perform surgery on Pokémon because the metallic smell of blood causes me to have flashbacks to that horrible day.

Delia is horrified, but sympathetic. For a moment, I think I've gotten through to her, but then she says that at least I have my grandchildren.

"I don't have anyone now," she wails. "No husband, no child, no relatives, no one. I'm all alone now. No one will miss me if I kill myself."

"But I would," I say as I reach for her hand. "I would."

Even though Delia and I have known each other for years, lately we've become good friends. Ever since my wife died, I miss having someone to talk to. And Delia's been especially lonely ever since Ash left on his Pokémon training journey. Our mutual loneliness has drawn us together, and it seems as if every afternoon I find myself heading over to her place for some lemonade and cookies. Matter of fact, I had just arrived for our daily visit when Officer Jenny called.

I had hoped that my words would've been of some comfort to her, but she breaks down once more. All I can do is stroke her hair and back, but she's too lost in her own grief to notice that I'm even there. Finally, the sobs subside, and she falls into an exhausted sleep once more. As I tuck the blanket around her chin, she looks so ravaged and ashen that I wonder how much more of this she can take.

But you're not going to go through this alone, Delia. I'm going to stay here with you.

But first, I search the bedroom and the adjacent bathroom thoroughly, opening drawers and closets to make certain that there's nothing there that Delia can harm herself with. Despite our talk, I still believe that Delia is so distraught that she would try to take her own life if she had a chance. I confiscate a razor, a bottle of cough syrup, and a packet of cold pills. I then lock the door - she's not going to leave this room without my knowledge - then pull up the armchair sitting next to the bed and settle myself in it.

For several hours, I watch her as she sleeps. Sometimes, the slow, steady breathing will be punctuated by a whimper, and I'll reach out and stroke her hair comfortingly until the whimpering ceases.

As the night wears on, my eyelids grow heavy -- this day has been exhausting for me too. Finally, I give in to my own exhaustion and fall into a dreamless sleep.

To be continued...

## Chapter 3

I'm jarred awake by a loud thump. My eyes pop open, and there's Delia, lying on the floor at my feet. For an instant, I'm frozen to my chair, to horrified to move.

Oh God, she did it. She killed herself.

The rush of blood from my frantically pounding heart then shocks me fully awake, and I drop to my knees beside her.

"Delia? Oh God, Delia!" I shake her shoulder roughly. "Answer me!"

Damn it, Delia, if you've done something stupid like kill yourself, I'm never going to forgive you for as long as I live. And I'll never forgive myself for not being able to stop you.

No response. I dig my fingers into her neck and relax upon locating her pulse.

She's still alive, thank God.

A closer examination leads me to the conclusion that she must've tried to get out of bed and either fainted or hit her head when she fell.

She begins to stir, and I gently shake her shoulder once more. "Delia? Delia, can you hear me?"

Her eyes slowly open. "What... what happened?"

I then proceed to give her the third degree for scaring me half to death. I know that I shouldn't be so harsh with her, but damn it, I'm tired and the shock of thinking that she was dead has nearly caused me to have a heart attack. My pulse rate still hasn't returned to normal yet.

*What in the world was she thinking, trying to get out of bed in her condition,* I fume as I head downstairs to get her something to eat.

As I put the teakettle on the stove, the phone rings. "Hello?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. I thought this was the Ketchum residence," apologizes Officer Jenny as she appears on the videophone's screen.

"No, this is the Ketchum residence," I reply while I place two slices of bread in the toaster. "Mrs. Ketchum is resting right now. Can I help you?"

"I just wanted to let her know that we're planning a memorial service tomorrow for her son and the other people that died aboard the *St. Anne*. A police boat will be departing from the Vermilion City Port tomorrow at eleven AM to take the victims' family members out to the spot where the ship sank. Then everyone can mourn their loved ones or leave memorials."

The toast is done and I start spreading strawberry jam on it. "How many other people died aboard the *St. Anne*, Officer Jenny?"

"Five people and their Pokémon. Ash Ketchum, Misty Waterflower, Brock Slate, James Morgan, and Jessie Rochester."

"I know the first three, but who were the other two?"

"Apparently they were members of Team Rocket, but that's all we know. Anyway, please give Mrs. Ketchum my message when she wakes up."

"I will. And thank you for calling, Officer Jenny."

I pour a cup of hot tea, place it on the tray next to the toast, and head back upstairs. At least Delia has taken my advice -- either that, or else I scared her into submission -- and is lying quietly in bed when I return.

My anger abates when she takes a sip of her tea. Her willingness to eat is a good sign - she's not so despondent that she's going to try to starve herself to death.

But when I mention that she ought to get in touch with Ash's father, she goes pale and I fear that she may faint once more. Needless to say, I'm stunned by her revelation that she used to be a member of Team Rocket and that Ash's biological father is none other than the head of Team Rocket himself, Giovanni. But I'm also touched that she trusted me enough to share her secret with me.

Delia urges me to go home and take care of my Pokémon, but I'm not entirely certain that I should leave her alone just yet. But she insists that she's feeling better and pushes me toward the bed, insisting that I take a nap. Too tired to resist, I lie down on the bed and fall asleep in a matter of seconds.

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I awake nearly two hours later. My stomach growls, reminding me that I haven't had breakfast, or much of anything else in the way of food, in the last twenty-four hours. I head downstairs to the kitchen and hear the sound of weeping. Delia, who's holding what appears to be a toy Kangaskhan, is sobbing on the couch in the living room.

"Oh, Delia." I sit down next to her and take her in my arms.

"Look. A mama and her baby," she sniffs, showing me the toy.

I hold her close as she cries once more. And my heart breaks for mother who no longer has a child to care for.

After Delia falls asleep, I quietly make my way into the kitchen. The neighbors have been more than generous, and there's no lack of food in the refrigerator -- the problem is deciding what to eat first. I reach for a slice of apple pie, and there's a knock at the back door. The visitor is Mrs. Farmington, who used to be Ash's kindergarten teacher. I gratefully accept the still-warm lasagna and tell her to stop



by again later when Delia's awake and feeling better. I select several other dishes from the refrigerator and begin eating in earnest.

Delia wakes up a little while later and proceeds to devour a huge helping of lasagna, which does my heart good. And as we do the dishes, she almost seems like her old self again. She even insists that I go home and get cleaned up.

I'm reluctant to leave her. She may be stronger physically from having eaten, but she's still emotionally frail. Nevertheless, I know I don't smell too good and probably don't look much better, either. The prospect of a hot shower and shave is definitely appealing.

As I step out the door, I reach up and gently touch her cheek, which now has some color again. "I'll call you later to see how you're doing. And don't hesitate to call me - no matter what the time - if you need anything."

After I get cleaned up, I check in with my lab assistants. They're all worried about Delia, but assure me that everything in the lab ran smoothly during my absence. I pick up a draft of my latest research paper, but I can't concentrate on making the necessary edits because my thoughts keep drifting back to Delia. After ten minutes of reading the same sentence over and over, I throw down the stack of papers on my desk.

"Foster," I call out to my senior research assistant as I head for the door, "keep everyone in line until I get back. I'm going back to Mrs. Ketchum's place."

I'm at her front door in less than five minutes. When she opens the door, I notice that she's been crying again - her eyes are red.

"It's just... it's too quiet," she admits.

And then I know that I've made the right decision by returning. I make myself a bed on the couch and tell Delia that she needs to get some sleep too. When she doubts that she'll be able to since all

she's done is sleep for the last twenty-four hours, I offer her one of the sedatives. But as she reaches for the entire bottle, I snatch it away. Yesterday's events are still all too clear in my mind.

But Delia assures me that she's not going to try to overdose on the medication. Reluctantly, I hand her the bottle. After reading the label, she hands the bottle back to me. "I'll see if I can get by without these tonight."

"Remember, if you need me for anything at all, don't hesitate to come down here and wake me, all right?"

"Thanks. Well, I guess I'd better head upstairs."

And as she looks at me with those red-rimmed eyes of hers, I want so badly to follow her upstairs. I want to hold her, comfort her, take away her pain. But I can tell that she's not ready for that, so I back off. "Good night, then."

I watch her go upstairs, then settle myself on the couch. I turn on the television, but after scanning through all the channels several times, I come to the obvious conclusion that there's nothing worth watching. I turn off the television and wander over to the bookcase on the opposite wall. I scan through the titles until, to my surprise, I come to a book of poetry.

*I didn't know Delia was fond of poetry*, I wonder as I thumb through the slim volume. I've always enjoyed poetry - I even write some myself, although it's not very good. I return to my spot on the couch and lose myself in the words of Tennyson, Byron, and Whitman.

A creak on the stairs causes me to look up. "Delia. Are you all right?"

"I couldn't sleep," she admits as she sits down in the chair next to the couch. And she looks it. "I thought I'd try one of the sleeping pills."

While she goes into the kitchen to get a glass of water, I attempt to read the label on the pill bottle. Damned eyes of mine - guess I do

need to make an appointment for bifocals. I squint until I make out enough of the fine print to read "side effects: difficulty breathing, severe drop in blood pressure, arrhythmia..."

And then I panic. Yes, I know that the odds of something bad happening are rare, but considering the extreme physical and emotional stress Delia's been through the last twenty-four hours, I start to worry. When she returns, I immediately offer to stay with her until she falls asleep. She gives me a strange look, but then I quickly add that it's because I want to make sure she doesn't have a reaction to the pill.

She agrees and we head upstairs. Delia curls up on the bed, and I settle myself in the chair next to her. For a few moments, we say nothing. Then our eyes meet and a look of mutual longing passes between us.

"Samuel, could you... could you just hold me for a little while?"

Oh Delia, all I want to do right now is hold you. I'll do anything to take away the pain you're going through right now.

"Certainly." I lie down next to her and wrap my arm around her waist. She snuggles against me, and I bury my nose in her jasmine-scented hair. I close my eyes and savor the sensation of having her soft, warm body against mine. It's been a long time since I've held a woman like this.

Her voice snaps me out of my reverie. "Do you think Ash had someone to hold him like this?"

I open my eyes. "Hmm?"

"Do you think Ash had someone to hold him like this? Do you think he was scared when... when...?"

I immediately feel guilty for having the thoughts I had about her a moment ago. My purpose here is to make Delia feel better, not me.

"Ash was with his friends," I reassure her as I slowly stroke her hair. "I think he had some comfort in that."

"I wish... I wish I could've been there with him. Sometimes I wish that I had never let him go on his Pokémon journey."

"Delia, more than anything Ash wanted to be a Pokémon trainer. You had to let him go."

"But... but if I hadn't, then maybe... maybe..."

She starts crying again, and I draw her closer to me. "Delia, you can't blame yourself for what happened to Ash. It's not your fault. If anything, you should blame me for giving Ash his first Pokémon and sending him off on his journey in the first place." That thought has crossed my mind several times during the past twenty-four hours - that *I'm* really the one responsible for Ash's death. And I'm surprised that Delia doesn't hate me for it. But maybe she hasn't considered it... until now.

She rolls over, and I brace myself for her anger. But to my surprise, her eyes are sympathetic. "It's not your fault, Samuel."

A wave of relief and gratitude sweeps over me. *Thank you, Delia.*

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"I guess Ash would've gone off to be a Pokémon trainer no matter what either one of us did," she concludes.

"That's right, Delia. So you can't blame yourself for what happened." *And thank you for not blaming me.*

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She yawns. "The pill must be starting to work." She closes her eyes and settles back on her pillow while I continue to stroke her hair.

"That's it, Delia. Just relax now. I'll stay right here with you." She presses herself closer to me. I continue to lightly run my hand over

her hair for a few moments more. She sighs softly, and I feel her relax against me. Certain that she's asleep now, I lean over and kiss her tenderly on the cheek... something I've been wanting to do for a long, long time. I close my eyes and nestle my cheek against her hair. My breathing slows until the two of us are breathing in unison. We are connected, she and I. We are in perfect synchrony. We are as one.

And with that thought, I drift off into a peaceful slumber.

To be continued...

## Chapter 4

When I awake several hours later, it's still the middle of the night. My arm is still wrapped around Delia's waist, and she's still asleep beside me.

I watch her for a few seconds.

At least I think she's asleep.

I watch her for a few seconds more.

How come she's not breathing?

For a terrifying moment, I wonder if she's still alive.

Damn it, I should've never let her take one of those pills.

Panicked, I dig my fingertips into her ribs, and she responds with a slow, deep breath. I watch her for a little longer, and it turns out that she's just in a deep sleep. Being careful not to disturb her, I slowly move my hand upward until my palm is resting over her heart. Yes, I know that I'm being a worrywart, but I'm still concerned about the side effects of the pill. And I don't think I could bear it if anything happened to her. But my fears are unfounded - her heartbeat is strong and steady. Satisfied that she's all right, I snuggle closer to her, bury my nose in her hair, and a sigh of gratitude escapes from my lips. This is heaven, lying next to her.

And then the guilt returns. I'm supposed to be comforting her, not the other way around. And even though it's clear in my mind that I would never take advantage of Delia in her time of grief, someone forgot to tell my body that. I'm still a man, after all - a man with desires, urges. And lying next to her is re-awakening the urges that I thought died when my wife did.

No, this is wrong. The last thing I want to do is hurt Delia. She's been hurt enough as it is. And if I lie here any longer, I may do something that I'll deeply regret.

I reluctantly remove my arm from around her and carefully ease myself up from the bed. I would sleep in the chair next to her, but feeling what I feel for her right now, I don't trust myself around her. I - we - will both be better off if I sleep downstairs on the couch. I pull the blanket atop her, tuck her in, and allow myself one more kiss on her cheek before heading downstairs.

Back downstairs on the couch, I spent the rest of the night and the early part of the morning trying to sort out my feelings for her.

Yes, we've known each other for years. Yes, we're friends - good friends.

But now... now I'm feeling something more than just friendship for her.

Maybe you're just a lonely guy who's gotten so turned on by lying in bed with an attractive, desirable woman that your hormones are doing all the thinking for you.

Maybe, but it's not just lust I'm feeling for her... no, it's something more than that.

But right now, a cold shower may not be a bad idea.

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The shower helps to clear my mind and wakes me up. Even though it's not even six AM yet, I decide to have some breakfast and read the newspaper. As I pick up the paper lying on the doorstep, the headline jumps out at me:

Local Boy, Four Others Missing, Presumed Dead In Shipwreck of the St. Anne

With trembling hands, I bring the paper inside and unfold it to read the rest of the article.

Ten-year old Pallet Town native Ashton Ketchum, along with four others, are missing and presumed dead following the sinking of the cruise ship St. Anne off of the coast of Vermilion City early Thursday morning. Ketchum, who had recently begun his Pokémon training journey, was aboard the ship along with Cerulean City Gym Leader Misty Waterflower, 12; Pewter City Gym Leader Brock Slate, 15; and Team Rocket members James Morgan and Jessica Rochester, ages unknown, when the ship sank. In addition, several Pokémon belonging to the victims are also missing and presumed dead. A memorial service for the victims and their families is planned for today...

The memorial service -- I had completely forgotten that it was today. But then again, it's only for the victim's families - I'm not related to any of those who died aboard the ship. Maybe Delia doesn't want me there. Maybe she wants to mourn Ash privately. If that's what she wants, I'll certainly comply with her wishes, but still... I'd like to be there with her.

And I'd like to do something for Ash. I'd like to honor his memory somehow. After all, I've known the boy practically all his life. He and Gary were inseparable as children.

Gary... I wonder if he knows yet? I'll have to see if I can get in touch with him later.

But right now... I glance at my watch. It's still too early for the florist to be open. I'd like to get a memorial wreath of some sort for Ash.

It's so hard to believe that a boy as full of life as Ash Ketchum is dead. The last time I spoke with him, I gave him a hard time about not having captured as many Pokémon as Gary. And the time before that, I dismissed his supposed sighting of the rare Pokémon Ho-oh as nonsense.



I regret that now. I'm supposed to be supporting new Pokémon trainers, not trouncing their confidence.

Could he have seen Ho-oh? No, of course not. But I shouldn't have casually dismissed Ash's observation, either.

Speaking of which, I probably should check in with the lab once more. I dial the number of the lab and

Foster, who's in the middle of feeding all the Pokémon breakfast, reports that everything is fine.

"How's Mrs. Ketchum doing?"

"A little better. She's still sleeping."

"Are you going to go to the memorial service with her?"

"I don't know yet, Foster. It's really supposed to be for the victims' families."

A creaking on the stairs tells me that Delia's awake. "Foster, I have to go now. Tell everyone to keep on doing what they've been doing. I'll talk to you later."

As I hang up the phone, a bedraggled-looking Delia comes staggering into the kitchen.

"How do you feel, Delia?" I ask as I put the teakettle on the stove.

She slumps down into one of the chairs at the kitchen table.  
"Groggy."

"That's probably the aftereffects of the sedative. Why don't you have something to eat? That should make you feel better." I open the refrigerator door. "I think Mrs. Casey brought over some blueberry muffins yesterday."

"That's okay. I think some toast will be fine." Delia makes a motion to get up, but I gently ease her back down into her seat.

"Sit, Delia. Let me take care of you." I locate the bread and put two slices into the toaster.

"You've already done enough for me the last couple of days, Samuel." And for the first time since Ash's death, a slight smile appears on her lips. "And don't know how I'm ever going to be able to thank you."

"You just did, Delia," I smile back.

"What's this?" She picks up the newspaper and, to my horror, I realize that I forgot to hide it from her.

"Delia, wait! Don't..."

Too late. Her face falls and her eyes begin to swim with tears.

"Delia, I'm so sorry. I didn't want you to see that headline." I reach for the newspaper, but she continues to stare at it.

"Those poor children," she says softly. "They were just babies too. Babies like Ash. They didn't have a chance to grow up."

"Delia, this article is obviously upsetting you. Let me have the newspaper and..."

She looks up at me suddenly. "You're coming with me to the memorial service, aren't you?" Her eyes are pleading. "Please say you will. I don't think I can go through it by myself."

"Of course I will, Delia, if that's what you want."

She nods. "I'd like to get flowers or something -- maybe some roses. Too bad the ones in my garden aren't blooming yet."

"Actually, I was thinking of a memorial wreath myself. Maybe we can go to the florist when it opens and see if we can find one." The teakettle whistles, and at the same time the toast pops out of the toaster. I assemble a quick breakfast for the two of us and sit down across from her at the table.

Delia takes a sip of her tea. "Samuel, why didn't you stay with me last night? When I woke up this morning, you were gone."

I choke on my toast. "I... uh..."

Because I was too absorbed in my own selfish thoughts that I felt guilty being around you.

Because I was sorely tempted to do something that I would've regretted for the rest of my life.

Because when I was lying next to you last night, I desperately wanted to make love to you. And I knew that in your emotional state, you wouldn't have resisted me. And I would have never been able to forgive myself for taking advantage of you in your time of grief.

"Samuel?"

"I... uh... I woke up early and decided to have a shower and make breakfast." I quickly gulp my tea, hoping that Delia won't notice my reddening face. I'm still ashamed of the thoughts I had about her last night.

"Oh."

I place my empty teacup down on its saucer with a loud clack and jump up from the table. "Um... Delia, do you think you'll be all right by yourself for a little bit?"

"I... I guess I will. I was going to take a shower and get ready for the service."

"Are you still feeling groggy from the pill? Dizzy? Nauseated? Anything like that?"

"No."

"Good. I'm going to run back to the lab for a little bit and check on everyone. And I'll stop by the florist on the way back and pick up a wreath. Would that be okay with you?"

"All right, Samuel. I trust your judgement." She gives me a funny look. "Are you feeling all right? Your face is red. Are you getting sick?"

And now I feel even worse for making her worry. She's got enough on her mind without worrying about me and my guilty conscience.

"I... um... Delia, don't worry about me. I'm fine. The person that you need to be concerned about is yourself." I push the plate of toast at her. "Now why don't you try to finish your breakfast? I'll be back soon, I promise."

I hurry out the door.

Right now, I can't face her.

To be continued...

## Chapter 5

I spend a couple hours at the lab attending to the Pokémon, then get dressed for the memorial service. On my way back to Delia's, I stop at the floral shop. And it's there that I find a Poké ball-shaped flower arrangement made of red and white roses - the perfect memorial for a Pokémon-obsessed boy. And on impulse I buy a single yellow rose and place it in the middle of the arrangement. Pikachu should have a memorial too.

Delia answers her door dressed in a plain black skirt with a matching sweater set. Black really isn't her best color - she looks so pale and tired. And despite the makeup, she still has huge dark circles under her eyes.

She gasps at the sight of the flower arrangement. "Oh, Samuel, it's beautiful. Ash would..." Her voice begins to quaver at the mention of her son's name. "He... would've loved it. That's so thoughtful of you - a Poké ball. And the yellow rose... that's for Pikachu, isn't it?"

I nod.

She sniffs the yellow rose in the center of the arrangement and smiles sadly. "I'm glad you're coming with me, Samuel. I... this... it's so hard..." She buries her face among the flowers so I can't see the tears rolling down her face. "No mother should ever have to bury their own son or daughter," she weeps. "No parent should outlive their own child."

I take her into my arms. "I know, Delia. I know," I whisper into her hair as a tear starts down my face.

Yes, Delia. I know.

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Aboard the ship are several people. I offer my condolences to the Waterflower sisters and the Slate family - I've known them for quite some time. All of the Kanto Gym Leaders occasionally call me for advice on dealing with their Pokémon. All except for...

"Giovanni," Delia whispers as she moves closer to me, her face pale.

I didn't think she'd be this frightened of her ex-lover. Anger begins to rise in me - what did Giovanni do to her that would make her so scared of him? As he approaches us, I'm overcome by a strong protective instinct and draw Delia closer to me.

"Hello, Delia," he smiles at her. "It's been a while."

"Giovanni," she replies, trying to avoid eye contact.

"Why are you here?" Giovanni inquires.

"My son. He was one of the passengers," Delia replies, her voice shaky.

"My condolences," Giovanni replies with feigned interest. He glances at his watch. "I hope this doesn't take too long."

Both Giovanni and I are shocked by the outburst that follows.

"You don't care, do you, Giovanni?" screams Delia, her eyes blazing with anger. "Damn it, Giovanni, at least have the decency to mourn for your son!"

Giovanni stares at his ex-lover in horror. "What... what did you just say?"

"Ash was *your* son, Giovanni! Yours and mine! I was pregnant with him when I left you and Team Rocket!"

Giovanni looks as if he's ready to faint. "You... you were...?"

Delia looks ready to faint too. I place my arm around her waist and answer the question for her. "Yes, Giovanni, it's true."

I almost feel sorry for the man when I see the bewildered look in his eyes. "Why? Why didn't you tell me, Delia?"

My presence has rallied her strength. "Because I wanted to leave everything that had to do with Team Rocket behind when I left you," Delia replies in a firm voice. "I never told Ash that you were his father. And I was afraid that if you found out the truth, you would come after me and take Ash away."

"And now he's been taken away from both of us for good, hasn't he?" Giovanni replies angrily. He looks as if he wants to strike her, but I'll kill him if he even makes a move in Delia's direction. But he motions to his Persian and the two retreat to the far side of the deck.

Delia begins to shake, and I help her to a nearby deck chair. "Are you all right, Delia?"

"I'll be all right, Samuel," she smiles slightly.

"That was a pretty brave thing you did, confronting Giovanni like that." I give her hand a squeeze.

"He deserved it," she replies with an edge of bitterness in her voice. "But now... now he can't take Ash away from me ever again." She smiles with relief and her eyes close.

I stay by her side, holding her hand, while she rests. The confrontation with Giovanni has sapped what little strength she had. These last couple of days have been so hard on her, physically and mentally.

*But don't worry, Delia, I promise as I lift her hand to my lips. You can lean on me.*

The ship soon stops over the site where Ash and his friends now lie. The Waterflower sisters throw pink roses into the ocean, then the Slate family tosses in a variety of items, including a book, rocks, and a couple of stuffed animals. Delia stiffens next to me as Giovanni approaches the ship's railing. He tosses overboard an arrangement of flowers in the shape of the Team Rocket insignia, then mutters something in Italian as he drops an additional rose after it. And I wonder if that single rose was for Ash - that Giovanni was mourning the son he never knew.

But now, it's Delia's turn. I start to approach the railing with her, but she indicates that she wants to be alone. I watch as she carefully lets go of the Poké ball wreath. "Bye baby. Sleep well, sweetie. I'll see you again someday soon." And as she sings one last lullaby to her child, she chokes up and can't continue. Tears flooding her eyes, she stumbles back to me. I take her into my arms and hold her tightly while her sobs and mine mingle with those of the others on board.

"Oh Ash... oh Ash, my baby..."

To be continued...



## Chapter 6

Back in the ship's terminal, I watch Delia interact with one of the Slate children. I wonder how she's going to be able to carry on without a child of her own to love and care for. Delia's always been very maternal and, until now, Ash has been the center of her existence. She's going to be absolutely lost now without him. She needs someone to love and fuss over. And at this moment, I find myself wanting to be the one to give her another child. Perhaps someday...

Out of nowhere, Officer Jenny comes racing up on her motorcycle. "Thank goodness I caught you all before you left!"

"Giovanni already left," I inform her.

Thank God.

"I'll contact him later," Officer Jenny says as she climbs off of her motorcycle.

"What's going on?" asks one of the Waterflower sisters.

"Everyone, I have some amazing news. The people that were thought to be trapped aboard the *St. Anne* have been found alive. Your loved ones are safe."

Everyone in the room is numb with shock at Officer Jenny's announcement, including me. Delia's legs start shaking, and I grip her hand tightly.

"How do you know for sure they're okay?" asks Brock's father.

"See for yourself," Officer Jenny grins as she picks up the receiver of the nearby videophone and starts pressing the numerical buttons on the console.

"Misty!" the Waterflowers shriek as a red-haired girl appears on the screen.

"Oh, I'm so happy for them," Delia says as the Waterflower sisters enjoy a tearful reunion. Then it's the Slate family's turn to rejoice as Brock appears.

And then...

"Hey, looks like a party's going on there," says a familiar voice.

Delia cries out as Ash's face appears on the screen. "Ash!"

She breaks loose of my grip and races to the console.

"Hi, Mom. What's going on?" the boy asks nonchalantly.

My mouth drops open in astonishment.

What's going on?! Ash, your mother's been worried sick about you. For God's sake, we thought you were dead!

The boy's smile fades. "Are you okay, Mom?"

"Ash, we've all been worried sick about you. You and your friends," says Delia, her voice trembling with emotion.

"Gosh, we didn't mean to worry anyone. We didn't realize that you guys knew about the ship sinking. But don't worry, Mom. We're all okay. Thanks to our Pokémon."

"Pika-pi!"

I make my way to Delia's side. "Looks like Pikachu's doing well. Are both you and Pikachu all right?"

"Hi, Professor Oak," Ash smiles as he tickles Pikachu's chin. "Yeah, we're fine."

"Ash, hurry up!" says Misty offscreen.

"I've gotta go now, Mom. If we don't catch the ferry back to the mainland, there won't be another one until tomorrow," Ash explains as he gathers up his backpack.

I can tell that Delia doesn't want to let Ash out of her sight.

"Ash, be sure to give us a call when you get to the next city, all right?"

"I will, Professor," the boy nods.

"Ash, come on!" yells Brock. "The ferry's getting ready to leave!"

"Gotta go! 'Bye everyone!" The screen goes black.

As the Waterflower sisters hug each other, Brock's father remarks that it's time that they headed home.

"And I think we should head back to Pallet Town, don't you?" I smile, reaching for Delia's hand. "Let's go home."

To be continued...

## Chapter 7

When we arrive back at the Ketchum house, Delia seizes an apron and hands me several containers of food lying on the kitchen table. "I don't know what I'm going to do with all this food and all these flowers. There's more here than I'll ever be able to eat. Here. You take some of this home. You and your assistants can eat this. That way, it won't go to waste. I hate throwing out food."

"Thanks, Delia. That's very generous of you."

"And I'll take these flowers to the hospital so that all the sick people can enjoy them." She begins gathering up all the bouquets left by neighbors and friends.

"Delia, do you need any help with those?" I offer, even though I'm about to drop all the dishes in my arms.

"No, I can manage. I'll be okay now."

As I head for the back door, she lays a hand on my arm. "Samuel, I want to thank you for being here for me the last couple of days. I don't think I would've made it through everything that's happened if it hadn't been for you."

"I'll always be here for you, Delia. No matter what."

She leans over and kisses me on the cheek. "Thanks for being my friend."

*A friend...*

My heart sinks a little.

Is that all I am to you, Delia? Just a friend? Because what I feel for you is more than just friendship.

She grabs a broom and begins sweeping the kitchen floor, tuning me out in the process.

I reluctantly leave her to her housework and head back up the hill to my house. My lab assistants eagerly pounce on the trays of food before I can get through the door.

"Foster may be a good researcher, but he sure sucks as a cook," one of my graduate students informs me between bites of potato salad. "He's almost as bad as you... no offense, Professor Oak."

"Hey, I warned you guys that macaroni and cheese was the only thing I knew how to make," Foster says, eagerly grabbing the plate of brownies out of my hands.

I leave my researchers to their feasting while I head over to my desk and try to get caught up on some work. I become so engrossed in editing my latest research paper that I don't look up until Foster wishes me "good-night". I glance at my watch and to my surprise, I discover that it's nearly six-thirty. A few minutes later, I find myself making my way down the hill to Delia's place.

"Oh, hi," she smiles as she opens the back door. "I was a little worried when you missed our afternoon lemonade-and-cookies chat. But I guess that's understandable, considering everything that's happened the last couple of days. You're probably tired of being around me."

"I never get tired of being around you, Delia," I say as I step inside the now-immaculate kitchen. "How are you feeling?"

"Better," she smiles while she attempts to stifle a yawn. "Although it's been a pretty eventful day. I was thinking about turning in soon."

"Guess I'd better go then and let you get some sleep." I turn around and make my way to the door.

Delia reaches for my arm. "No. Don't leave just yet. Have you eaten?"

My stomach growls in response. "I've been so busy getting caught up on my research that I forgot to eat lunch. Or dinner, for that matter," I say with a light laugh.

Delia begins searching through her refrigerator. "Didn't you eat any of the food I sent back with you?"

I shake my head. "My assistants beat me to it."

"Let's see... how about some pasta salad and apple pie?"

"Sounds wonderful." My stomach growls again in agreement.

Delia places the dishes on the table, hands each of us a plate, and we settle ourselves at the kitchen table. "Ash called just before you came over," Delia informs me while she scoops some pasta salad onto my plate. "They said that they just got off the ferry and are going to spend the night in the nearest Pokémon Center."

"I'm glad he took my advice and called you."

"Yes. I guess I am going to worry about him more than usual for a while. But I guess I shouldn't. He has his friends to help watch out for him. Just like I have you to watch out for me." Delia smiles as she places her hand atop mine.

"Delia... could we talk about that for a moment?"

"About what, Samuel?"

Our eyes meet, and I take her hand in mine. "About you and me. About what's happened between us the last couple of days."

"Samuel, as I said before, I'm always going to be grateful to you for being here for me. I don't know what I would've done without you. You really are my best friend."

*Friend...* there's that word again.

I take a deep breath. "Delia, I have a confession to make."

She gives me a puzzled look. "Confession? About what?"

"Delia, when you asked me this morning as to why I didn't stay with you last night, I wasn't entirely truthful with you earlier."

"You weren't?"

"No. I told you that I had awakened early and decided to take a shower."

"I don't understand, Samuel. Are you saying that's not the reason why you left?"

"No, that part was true. It's just that I didn't tell you the reason why I left to take a shower. You see, last night, when I was lying there next to you, I began to have... um..." My face starts going red again.

"Have what, Samuel?"

"I began to have thoughts about you."

"Thoughts? What kind of thoughts?"

"Thoughts that I'm now rather ashamed of. You see, I... Delia, you're a very attractive woman."

She begins to blush. "Thanks for the compliment, although I'm still kind of confused as to what you're trying to tell me."

"Delia, what I'm trying to say is that last night I very much wanted to... I..." My face is flaming now.

"You what, Samuel?"

I screw up my courage and look her in the eye. "Delia, last night I was tempted - very tempted - to take advantage of you. Lying next to you, holding you... Delia, I wouldn't be a man if I didn't have those type of feelings for you."

"Feelings? What kind of feelings?"

"Actually, they were more like urges... desires."

Delia's eyes grow wide as she understands exactly what kind of desires I'm talking about.

"Samuel... are you saying that you... you *wanted* me?"

"Yes. And if I stayed there with you, I know that I would've likely done something that I would later regret. Forgive me, Delia. I'm ashamed for even thinking about you like that during your time of need. I feel as if I've failed you as a friend."

"Samuel, you didn't fail me. You helped me get through everything that's happened the last couple of days. No one could've been a better friend to me than you."

"A true friend wouldn't have been so selfish as to let their hormones cloud their judgement. To let their needs come before yours."

"But you *didn't* take advantage of me, Samuel. Even though you wanted to, you didn't. And that says a lot for you and the kind of friend you are. You're a good man, Samuel Oak." And to my surprise, she leans over and kisses me lightly on the cheek. "Although I must admit that I'm kind of surprised that you think of me that way. I mean, I've known you since I was a teenager and I was helping you out at the lab."

"I know. And that's what's making this so difficult. Delia, I'm old enough to be your father. And if that's how you think of me - as a father figure - then I understand." I let go of her hand. "But the problem is that I don't think of you like a daughter. You're not a



teenager anymore, Delia. You're a woman - a very attractive, desirable woman. And I'd be lying if I said that I didn't have less-than-fatherly thoughts about you."

"Samuel, you're my *friend*, not my father. And I guess the reason I'm so surprised is that I never knew that you felt like that about me before."

"Delia, what man wouldn't feel that way about you? That gorgeous, silky, jasmine-scented auburn hair of yours; those big, brown eyes; soft, full lips; those incredible breasts, round hips, long legs... I'd have to be *dead* not to feel anything sexually for you!"

A smile of amusement appears on Delia's lips.

"So you're not completely disgusted by the thought that your next-door neighbor - someone who's supposed to be your friend - is actually a perverted old man who's having sexual fantasies about you?" I ask hopefully.

"No, I'm not disgusted. I'm actually kind of flattered, really. But I guess it's going to take me a little time to get used to the idea." She yawns once more. "And it's been a long day."

"I'll let you get some sleep, then." I get up and head for the back door while Delia follows behind me. "Good night, Delia. Hopefully tonight you'll be able to get a peaceful rest."

"Now that I know that Ash and his friends are all right, I know I will," she smiles contentedly.

"But if you *do* need anything tonight, don't hesitate to call me, okay?"

"I know, Samuel." The two of us are now standing together in the doorway, facing each other. My pulse quickens as she moves closer to me. "Because you really are my best friend."

And as our lips meet, a jolt of electricity not unlike a Raichu's Thunderbolt surges through my body. Delia and I have kissed before, but always in a friendly, innocent way. And never on the lips - - until now. Slowly, our arms twine around each other, drawing us closer until my wildly beating heart is pressed against hers. And after our lips part, we remain in each other's arms for what seems like an eternity, together savoring the realization of what has just happened.

For out of death has arisen a new beginning.

THE END